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SUBJECT: TFI01: GOI APPROACHES EMBASSY RE SAFETY OF ITALIAN  
JOURNALISTS IN BAGHDAD

CLASSIFIED BY: DEPUTY CHIEF OF MISSION EMIL SKODON FOR REASONS 1.5 (B)  
AND (D).

1. (SBU) MFA SECRETARY GENERAL'S CHIEF OF STAFF, ANTONIO ZANARDI LANDI, PHONED DCM AT THE INSTRUCTION OF FOREIGN MINISTER FRATTINI TO EXPRESS GOI CONCERNS ABOUT SAFETY OF THE TWENTY ITALIAN JOURNALISTS AND SUPPORT STAFF IN BAGHDAD. THE JOURNALISTS WERE AT THE HOTEL SHERATON AND THE PALESTINE HOTEL. ZANARDI LANDI ASKED THAT THE EMBASSY CONVEY THESE CONCERNS ASAP TO THE "APPROPRIATE U.S. AUTHORITIES."

2. (C) ZANARDI LANDI'S APPROACH CAME IN THE WAKE OF INTERNATIONAL MEDIA REPORTS THAT COALITION FORCES HAD FIRED AT THE PALESTINE HOTEL AND CAUSED CASUALTIES AMONG FOREIGN JOURNALISTS STAYING THERE. HE TOLD DCM OFF-THE-RECORD THAT THE MFA AND PRIME MINISTER'S OFFICE WERE UNDER STRONG PRESSURE FROM ITALIAN JOURNALISTS ASSOCIATION AND OTHERS TO "DO SOMETHING" TO HELP PROTECT ITALIAN NATIONALS AMONG THE FOREIGN MEDIA IN BAGHDAD. HENCE THE APPROACH TO THE EMBASSY. (EARLIER IN THE DAY, FOREIGN MINISTER FRATTINI, SPEAKING IN BUDAPEST WHILE ON AN OFFICIAL VISIT TO HUNGARY, SAID THE MFA WOULD SEEK TO VERIFY DETAILS OF THE PALESTINE HOTEL INCIDENT. FRATTINI ADDED THAT "WE ALL KNOW VERY WELL THAT THE ALLIED FORCES, WHOM WE SUPPORT, DO NOT MAKE A HABIT OF FIRING ON JOURNALISTS" AND ADDED "IT IS OUR DUTY TO REMIND COALITION FORCES TO BE PARTICULARLY ALERT WHEN OPERATING IN AREAS WHERE THE PRESS IS PRESENT.")

3. (C) IN RESPONSE TO DCM'S REQUESTS FOR MORE DETAIL, ZANARDI LANDI CONFIRMED GOI UNDERSTANDING THAT ALL OF THE TWENTY ITALIANS WERE STAYING AT ONE OR THE OTHER OF THE TWO AFOREMENTIONED HOTELS. HE DID NOT KNOW EXACTLY HOW MANY WERE AT EACH HOTEL. THE LAST CONTACT WITH THEM HAD BEEN IN THE MORNING OF APRIL 8, ROME TIME. DCM ASKED THE JOURNALISTS' PREFERENCE: WERE THEY SEEKING SAFEHAVEN WITH U.S. FORCES IN BAGHDAD, DID THEY WANT TO BE EVACUATED, OR DID THEY JUST WANT THE HOTELS TO BE NO-FIRE ZONES? ZANARDI LANDI WAS NOT SURE, ALTHOUGH HE EXPECTED THAT AT LEAST THE SEVEN ITALIANS WHO HAD BEEN "ARRESTED" BY IRAQI AUTHORITIES AND WERE BEING DETAINED AT THE PALESTINE HOTEL WOULD WANT TO DEPART. THE GOI HOPED TO BE IN CONTACT WITH THE JOURNALISTS LATER TODAY AND WOULD PUT THESE QUESTIONS TO THEM.

4. (C) SEPARATELY, EMBASSY ODC CHIEF RECEIVED A REQUEST FROM ITALIAN MILITARY TO ADVISE RE FEASIBILITY OF IAF C-130J EQUIPPED WITH CHAFF AND FLARES LANDING AT BAGHDAD INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT TO EVACUATE ITALIANS AND OTHER NATIONALS. THAT REQUEST BEING FORWARDED THROUGH MIL CHANNELS. (COMMENT: THIS IS APPARENTLY ONLY A REQUEST FOR INFORMATION FOR PLANNING PURPOSES AT THIS POINT AND DOES NOT NECESSARILY PRESAGE AN IAF FLIGHT. END COMMENT.)

5. (C) ACTION REQUESTED: WE SHOULD RESPOND IN A TIMELY WAY THAT HELPS THE GOI PREEMPT THE NEGATIVE STORIES ABOUT "RECKLESS" COALITION FORCES SURE TO BE SPUN UP BY SOME PORTIONS OF THE ITALIAN PRESS. PLEASE ADVISE APPROPRIATE RESPONSE TO MFA.  
SEMBLER

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